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AUTHOR Lert, Erika Nagy
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ABSTRACT

The study described in this paper focuses on English language acquisition by adult Hmong Laotian immigrants in an English as a Second Language (ESL) program in a city in the Northeastern United States. Preexistent levels of literacy and second language familiarity are discounted as influences on the speed of students' acquisition of language. Rather, specific learning styles, seen as reflective of the nonformal educational practices typical of a society that until recently was nonliterate, are identified as factors in English language acquisition speed. These learning styles include mimesis, teacher identification, peer communication, and group support and cooperation. In addition to describing the research setting and investigative methods employed, this paper reviews literature on second language acquisition and discusses the current study in the context of symbolic interactionist and ethnomethodological theories. Appended to the paper are the questionnaire administered to the Laotian students, a summary of questionnaire responses, and a count of Indochinese population by State. (Author/GC)

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ADULT SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: LAOTIAN HMONG IN SOUTHLAND

by

Erika Nagy Lert

Research Paper

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of Master of Arts

in the Department of Anthropology at Brown University

Date. March 25, 1980 . Marcia Haller

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Date. . . . . Phillip E. Lewis

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ABSTRACT

The topic of this research is English language acquistion by adult Hmong Laotian immigrants in a formal educational setting. Preexistent levels of literacy and second language familiarity are discounted as influencing the speed of the students' acquisition of English. Attention is given specific learning styles of the students. These include mimesis, teacher identification, peer communication, and group support and cooperation. They are seen as reflective of the nonformal educational practices typical of a society which until recently was nonliterate.

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Phakke Village, do you still
remember?
At this time of year the song of insects
fill the air.
People in groups,
Down Phachong Hill.
Insects and birds would sing, swelling
our hearts with nostalgia.
Look toward the road to Long Chieng.
Flowers are blossoming here and
there,
Filling the deep valleys with the
splashes of color
Clouds move slowly up the hill.
Look toward Nong Cha.
Flocks of swallows circle the sky.
Working the fields, young people
yearn for their lovers
As though big palms pierce their
hearts.
How time brings change.
We can't know what is there now.
Perhaps the mattresses upon which
we slept lie unused and rotten.
Rain runs through our houses,
Bushes encroach upon the wall,
And grasses cover the road where we
once walked.
How long will this image be mine?

Hmong Poem

I. Introduction

This work should be considered as a pilot study of English language acquisition by adult Hmong Laotian immigrants in a formal educational setting. Its objective was to examine the relation of learning environment to adult language acquisition. In order to do this I attempted to isolate the more salient features of that environment, and evaluate their success in meeting the instructional needs of the learners as a group, rather than as individual members of the class.

The subjects of the investigation included one class of adult Hmong ESL or 'English as a Second Language' students, and the program of which the class was a part. Both were located in what I am calling 'Southland,' a moderately-sized industrial city in Southern New England. The class was sponsored by a federally funded agency known in this study as 'Minorities Job Project' or MJP.

At the time of the first classroom observation in May, 1979, the Hmong had been perceived by the MJP staff as progressing at an abnormally slow rate in their study of English. This puzzled the teachers, particularly since, according to the administrator of the Southeast Asia Group (SEAG) at MJP, it seemed that the Hmong were enthusiastic,

good students. She believed that though they tried hard, they progressed very little. Yet she characterized them as the best of all the Indochinese pupils at MJP, basing her assessment on their steady attendance, strong demands and general outspokenness. It is interesting to note that this positive evaluation was of their behavior, not of their academic performance.

This SEAG administrator suggested that the problems the Hmong were having were due to the nonliteracy of the culture. Nonliteracy of the Hmong became the initial focus of my investigation. Over the next several months I observed the ESL class and home tutoring sessions, and designed and administered a questionnaire to adult Hmong enrolled in that class at MJP. In contradiction to expectations, I eventually determined that (a) slightly more than half the students were literate, and (b) 80% of the class had some proficiency in the skills related to either literacy, second language acquisition or both. It was impossible to clearly distinguish those who did from those who did not on the basis of ESL classroom performance, however. I subsequently removed preexistent levels of educational or linguistic attainment as significant variables affecting language acquisition at MJP.

I attempted to identify sociocultural factors that may

have been responsible for the students' learning problems. With the cooperation of the MJP staff I also experimented in designing a more successful learning environment, which allowed me to see the immediate influence of different teaching styles and informally evaluate their efficacy. By September, 1979, I believed that I had isolated certain learning styles of the Hmong, and ways in which these styles could be implemented in the classroom. The teacher of the class also saw general improvement and knowledge growth, which in turn changed his response to the students. Originally, he said, he had felt frustration at the students' seeming inability to acquire English. He had characterized them in his own mind as unable to learn, although he realized this was not a rational assessment. But his characterization changed by the end of the summer when he witnessed both their steady improvement and more relaxed response to the classroom environment.

II. Review of the Literature on Second Language Acquisition

A review of the literature reveals an absence of research on the mechanisms of adult second language acquisition. Manuals outlining classroom methodology are the major sources of written information on the subject. Thus the bulk of my theory derives primarily from studies of bilingual/bicultural children.

Lambert et al. (1972), for instance, have examined the extent to which attitudes and motivation influence second language learning. They support an argument which states that "the learner's ethnocentric tendencies and his attitudes toward the other group are believed to determine his success in learning the new language" (ibid.:473). They also agree that increased proficiency in the second language may result in feelings of 'anomie' which occur as the learner loses ties with one culture and anticipates establishing them with another (ibid.). They cite Pearl and Lambert who determined that "bilingual children have markedly more favorable attitudes towards the 'other' language community in contrast to the monolingual children" (ibid.:476). These sympathetic attitudes were reflected by the parents of the children. Pearl and Lambert questioned whether it might not be the case that "linguistic skills in a second language, extending to the point of bilingualism,

are controlled by family-shared attitudes toward the other linguistic-cultural community" (ibid.). Ultimately they recommend that some consideration be given to sociopsychological aspects of language acquisition.

The implications of the study by Lambert et al. question the motivation of the Hmong in acquiring English, and their orientation toward the general 'American' culture (if such a thing can be said to exist). Unfortunately, there are no data which would indicate the extent to which attitudinal and motivational variables might be influencing language learning by the Hmong. These issues could provide the basis for further fruitful scientific research.

In another study Rubinstein (1979) investigates language learning in a stressful environment. He criticises Lambert and others for only examining language acquisition under favorable conditions. Rubinstein discovers that in situations of physical or psychological stress attempts to learn a second language can be both cognitively and psychologically harmful, in addition to being unsuccessful. His study is germaine to analyses of cognitive function and language acquisition by the Hmong. It is evident that the Hmong in Southland are living under conditions of both physical and mental stress. They suffer from poor nutrition, an unfamiliar and unpleasant climate and

insufficient medical care, and are trying to adapt to a new and radically different sociocultural system. While I do not mean to imply that their ESL experience actually was harmful, I do wish to question the extent to which the psychological and socioeconomic factors in the evironment were contributing to their learning difficulties.

Joiner (1974) emphasizes tailoring the language program to the specific needs of the students. She writes,

> The learning styles, needs and interests of individuals have often in the past been neither acknowledged nor honored by proponents of a method of instruction which was chiefly language centered. (ibid.:154)

She advocates the teacher altering her or his methods until one is found which is best suited to the student. For Joiner the teacher has two responsibilities, "determining the individual needs and characteristics of the student and designing learning experiences to meet those needs" (ibid.). Similar to Mehan (1979), she stresses the interactive aspect of the educational process.

Tailoring the program to the specific learning needs of the students is the primary orientation of my research. Rather than accepting Joiner's argument to implement changes on the level of the individual, however, I would suggest

alterations first be made to allow for a general progression of the entire group. This is particularly necessary if it seems that the cultural learning styles of the pupils are not being addressed within the educational environment.

III. Methods

The bulk of my primary data consists of field observations in one class of beginning and beginning-intermediate adult ESL students at HJP. Interviews and observations also were conducted outside HJP. In addition, some conversations were recorded and transcribed. Finally, as discussed below, a questionnaire (see Appendix A) was administered to students in Hmong with the help of several native translators, and the results were tabulated (see Appendix B).

Books and articles about the Hmong, both by Hmong authors and by outside observers, were used mostly to chronicle the traditional Hmong sociocultural system in Laos and Indochina. Other materials described difficulties frequently encountered by members of nonliterate societies facing urbanization and industrialization, and their responses to formal education. Information also was obtained from informants on related topics.

Formal interviews were conducted in Hmong using native translators with 15 of the 15 to 25 students enrolled in the class at HJP. The translators, teachers and administrators at HJP were interviewed informally, in addition to Anglos

involved with the Hmong community, and members of the house in which I observed tutoring. Ongoing discussions were carried out with teachers and administrators at MJP. The purpose of the interviews was to (1) provide some information about the Hmong in Southland, (2) obtain the opinions of the students regarding the operation of the ESL class and specific features they wanted to see changed and improved, (3) determine the operating procedures at MJPand (4) define the opinions of the teachers and administrators that ran the SEAG language/ vocational program.

The purpose of participant-observation in the classroom was, first, to observe the nature of the interactions between teachers and students, and second, to experiment with different teaching techniques in order to assess which ones best addressed the needs of the pupils. These needs were determined through literature on educational preferences of nonliterate, clan-structured societies, observing the successes of home-tutoring and attempting to discover their bases, and observing how the students consciously or unconsciously adapted their behavior to the classroom. It should be noted that the students regularly attending home-tutoring sessions were able to responde to basic commands in English such as "Open the door," and "Sit down," after only four or five hour-long sessions. This ability was in stark opposition to that of persons enrolled

in the ESL class at MJP some of whom, after three months of steady work, were still unable to respond to commands in English such as "What is your name?" and "Where do you live?"

The MJP and home-tutoring instructors approached language teaching in similar, although not identical ways. Each emphasized discussion in the nonnative language and various drill exercises. More stress was placed on reading and writing by the MJP teacher, however. This action corresponded to the wishes of the students many of whom, when interviewed, indicated their preferences for learning reading, writing and oral skills at the same time. They felt that reading and writing not only were mnemonic devices, aiding in their oral achievement, but also allowed them to perform such activities as reading newspapers and letters.

The objective of making actual recommendations about specific techniques, or carrying out those techniques myself, was to see, through trial and error, which had the best success. I felt a method was successful when both (a) it elicited an enthusiastic and interested response from the class, and (b) the students appeared to learn the material with comparatively little effort. I considered a technique to be unsuccessful when the pupils responded negatively,

didn't respond at all, or responded positively but had comparatively great difficulty learning the material. A basic assumption of this research was that an environment in which pupils seemed relaxed and responsive is more conducive to learning than one in which tension and conflict is evident.

My activities at HJP can be divided into two distinct stages. Stage 1 included my assuming the roles of (a) outside observer, and (b) participant-observer. As an 'outside observer', I was familiar with neither students nor teachers. I sat in on classes and observed teacher and student behavior. This was relatively short-lived, soon evolving into (b) 'participant-observaton'. I clearly was placed within the category of HJP staff by the students. Basically I helped out in the classroom at this point, occasionally giving the less advanced group special attention. The majority of my activities were controlled by the teacher.

In Stage 2 my actions acquired a degree of autonomy. Provided with a series of Hmong interpretors by HJP, I interviewed most of the students in the ESL class. I elicited background information, students' responses to the classroom situation and their opinion of the general efficacy of the program at HJP. In this role I was an

'inside observer'. I eventually became a 'full participant', being encouraged to run the class in the absence of the instructor, make direct suggestions regarding his teaching, and so forth.

Because of the nature of my status at HJP, and the goals of this pilot study, I did not employ a quantitative approach to this study. The situation was not structured in such a way as to either demand or allow for pre-test/post-tests or control groups, although more intensive analysis of the learning problems of the Hmong would require greater emphasis on quantifiable assessments of general improvement, rate of language acquisition, and so forth. The only data of this sort was obtained in the questionnaires (see Appendices A and B) which were given verbally to the students in Hmong by one of several young adult male Hmong translators. These interviews lasted around thirty minutes for the women and about an hour for the men. In general the women seemed more constrained and less talkative during the interviews than the men. They expressed their personal opinions about HJP, the structure of the class and potential improvements less frequently and to a lesser extent than the men.

IV. Background on the Hmong

A number of ethnographies have depicted the traditional way of life of the Hmong in Indochina (Barney, 1957; Geddes, 1976; Grognet et al., 1979; Lebar, et al., 1964; Mai, 1979; Reed and Vang, 1978; Tung, 1979; Vang 1979a and b). The Hmong originally were indigenous to China. For several reasons, including farming methods which required continuing amounts of uncultivated land, they migrated southward and westard. Arriving in Laos in the 1820's they setted primarily in the Xiengkhouang Province (see Figure 1). The Hmong preferred to live in dispersed villages in isolated mountain regions above 3,000 feet. The villages were clan-ruled and the clan leader frequently was the village headman. These 'free men', as they called themselves, traditionally were slash-and-burn agriculturalists growing corn, rice, and other foods. They also cultivated poppies, from which they manufactured opium as a cash crop. They were known for their remarkable horsemanship. Their craftsmen were distinguished by the quality of their finely embroidered, strongly colored clothing and their heavy silver jewelry.

The Hmong were patrilineal. Clans were exogamous and exerted considerable influence over the individual person or nuclear family. I observed this continuing influence in

Figure 1. Laos and Surrounding Countries.

(taken from Reed and Vang, 1978)

Southland in the decision of the clan leaders to encourage English language acquisition, and the determination with which the individual clan members subsequently followed their recommendations. This influence was noticeable on at least one other occasion, when the approval of the clan leaders was needed in order to insure the participation of Hmong in an Indochinese crafts festival sponsored by a local ethnographic museum.

Polygyny, particularly the levirate, was relatively common and has continued until the present time. One male informant, Ge, said that although polygyny was not unusual in Laos, only monogamous couples were permitted to emigrate to the U.S. Ancestor worship was practiced, as was that of praying to the 'tlan'. Some attention was given to certain Buddhist deities; when asked their religion, a significant number of students at HJP responded 'Buddhist.' 'Tlan' are spirits which were thought by the Hmong to inhabit certain objects. They were believed to be the cause of good or bad fortune. Shamans were integral to the society. Protestant and Roman Catholic missionaries have been working among the Hmong for a number of decades, however, and the role of the shaman gradually has decreased in importance. Ostensibly this decline is related to the growing number of converts to Christianity. The missionaries also have been the catalyst for the change of the Hmong language from oral to written.

In the 1950's the sound system was transcribed into Laotian letters by the Catholics and Roman letters by the Protestants.

Certain myths about the Hmong arose concerning their supernatural assocation with cats and tigers. Geddes (1976) gives an account, for example, of the belief that the thick silver necklace commonly worn as an indicator of wealth also was influential in preventing the wearer from resuming the shape of a tiger. While it is doubtful such a belief is still held by the ethnic Laotians or any other population, there remain carry-overs from this earlier period. Frequently the Hmong are referred to as 'Meo' or 'Miao'. These names, standard in academic and governmental literature, are highly derogatory. They underscore the negative association made by the Chinese between the Hmong and cats. The ancient Chinese ideograph 'Miao' was a representation of a cat's head. As Ge clearly stated, to call someone a 'Miao' in Laos even today is an insult intended to provoke a fight.

In the 1890's the French began colonization of Laos, precipitating the gradual but irrevocable changes which were to occur in the traditional Hmong sociocultural system. In 1896, to oppose a tax which was felt to have been unjustly levied upon them, the Hmong rose in revolt against the

French. The revolution was short-lived, since an agreement between the two groups was soon reached.

A period of relative calm followed this action until the Japanese occupation of Laos between 1941 and 1945. The years following the withdrawal of the Japanese were ones of continual internal and external warfare. Various factions fought for permanent control of the government. The two major groups included the Royal Lao and the Pathet Lao. The latter were Communist and opposed, among other things, the intervention of France in Laos. The Royal Lao ruled the country for some years and fought with the U.S. against Communist occupation of Laos.

During the last few years of the war most people moved from the mountains into the cities. Cha, a young Hmong male, claimed

> Most of them <the Hmong> lived in the city. Because in the mountains it's difficult to live. Most of the soliders wanted to live in the mountains because this is a good place for them to live. So the people, the population, they should live in the town. And they let the soldiers live in the mountains. There's the best place for them to fight.

After migrating to urban areas the people were supported, for the most part, by the existing government

until its collapse in 1975. In May of that year many persons who had sided with the non-Communist forces were airlifted from Long Chieng. Those who remained were forced to flee the country or face execution in what has amounted to ethnocide by the Pathet Lao. Persons fortunate enough to escape were taken to one of several refugee camps, such as Nongkhai, in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia. Originally a border market town on the northeastern edge of Thailand (Tambiah, 1968), Nongkhai has become the home for some 16,000 Hmong, in addition to other Indochinese, who presently are awaiting relocation (MacFarquhar, 1979). It also was the camp in which the majority of interviewed students had resided.

Interred in these camps for indefinite periods of time the emigrants lived in unsanitary and potentially hazardous conditions. The basic advantage to their move was the possibility of placement in a more hospitable country. It is not known to what degree individuals in the refugee camps were free to choose their country of relocation. A large family I knew of had been split when nine of the ten adult children went to a variety of countries other than the one in which their elderly parents lived.

Cha described the ideal situation for a Hmong adult as one in which he or she remained in Laos as a soldier.

> You should be a solider...and go help them fight the Communists. Then you will have a land to live in. If we help each other we can have a longer life. If we don't help each other then they will come over and over and kill you all the time. And you don't know when you will die and when you will have a life.

He also felt that with enough "helpers...weapons...and soliders we won't lose the country." For the most part, Cha asserted, the Hmong in the U.S. don't believe the war in Laos is finished, nor will it be until the country is regained. He believed about half the immigrants would like to return to Laos. The other half want to remain in the U.S., away from the fighting. For Cha the U.S. is a safe place, a refuge, because "if the other countries want to fight and come over to the United States they can't, because we have more population here so we can win."

V. The Hmong in Southland and MJP

The Hmong began arriving in Southland in 1975. According to one Anglo administrator individuals initially were drawn there by chance, with families gradually following individual members. Relocation has been contingent upon acquiring a sponsor, which may be either an individual or organization. Churches occasionaly sponsored families, for instance. Generally upon arrival the refugees were greeted by a representive of an agency responsible for the resettlement of immigrants to the area. This agency provided housing, furniture and other necessities for the newly-arrived. A variety of competing organizations administered to the specific needs of the relocated refugees.

At the time this study took place an estimated 300 to 1200 Hmong lived in Southland. This figure (which varied according to source) constantly changed, reflecting the frequent moves made by entire families or groups into or out of the area. In July, 1979, there were over 210,000 Indochinese residing in the U.S. (Indochinese Refugee Reports, 1979), consisting of Cambodians, Vietnamese, Hmong and ethnic Lao. California had the greatest number with 58,000 persons, followed by Texas (19,000) and Pennsylvania (9,000). The state in which the study took place was ranked

somewhere slightly below the middle (see Appendix C), although it is not known what proportion of this Indochinese population was Hmong.

Although the language training of adult Indochinese in Southland was considered poor, by the Hmong themselves and the teachers and administrators of the programs, the low quality of the teaching and educational facilities at various language programs throughout the city clearly reflected a lack of funding rather than of concern or capability of the staffs. Poor quality frequently was the reason given for migration of the Hmong from the area by both Anglos and Hmong. Several months prior to the beginning of the study approximately 200 Hmong had left Southland for a midwestern town in order to receive better language instruction, and it was anticipated by the Hmong during the summer that an additional ten to twenty families would do the same sometime in the fall. One woman, a professional ESL teacher who spent her summer months voluntarily teaching English to the Hmong in their homes, believed the major problem of the language programs was their irrelevancy to the specific experiences, goals or learning difficulties of the students (see Joiner, 1974). Yet the students themselves, when questioned, indicated their satisfaction with the content of the classroom materials.

The concern with acquiring competency in English was reflected not only in these large-scale moves, but also in the attitudes of the Hmong who remained. Upon arrival in Southland the men usually were sent to work in one of a number of factories located throughout the city. The majority of women worked in the home. Factory work was immediately accessible because there was no need for the workers to be fluent in English. Employment in the factory also prevented the individual from becoming proficient in English since ethnic groups frequently worked together. Cha succinctly summarized the situation:

> The refugees who come to Southland don't know, but are just sponsored by their sponsor...then they just go to work and they don't have school. But after that they have their family coming and they need more English and they need how to read and how to write English to understand before they go to work...Some factories just hire people who know how to write and how to read and how to speak English and then they pay more money for those people. And the first people who had resided here went to work immediatley when they came here. So they don't have a good job and they have low pay. They have a difficult life to live in Southland.

One solution to this dilemma was to take English language courses in the evening following a day of factory or housework. Most people simply were too tired for this to be satisfactory. Another solution, which was encouraged by

Hmong clan leaders in Southland, recommended that the individuals quit work, go on Welfare and learn English full-time. When interviewed students said they would like to study English between 4 and 8 hours a day, five days a week, for one to two years.

This second solution proved a problem for the administrators of the language and vocational programs. Typically the Indochinese had a reputation for dependability among employers in the area. The administrator of the SEAG claimed the Indochinese, in general, were preferred over Blacks or Hispanics. She attributed this preference to their conscientiousness and dependability. She said employers called up asking specifically for Indochinese workers. She was afraid, however, as were other Anglo administrators, that once word spread that Hmong were quitting their jobs to learn English they would loose the respect they had gained from the community. Additional difficulties arose as a result of quitting work. Some individuals, having left their jobs and attempting to qualify for Welfare, were still waiting for Welfare money to arrive when the rent came due. They were left without the funds to pay it.

Although the Hmong were characterized by an Anglo at MJP as politically docile and unsophisticated, they were

described by an administrator of one of the other Indochinese programs in Southland as ambitious, wanting to be prosperous ("unlike some other immigrants"), and desiring education. The Hmong seemed to display considerable insight into the mechanisms of the acculturative process by gambling current reputation on long-term social and economic benefits. The only readily accessible factory jobs were dull, and the conditions and payment were mediocre to poor, particularly for non-English speakers. Yet without proficiency in English, as Cha claimed, it was nearly impossible to break from such jobs and find more personally and financially rewarding employment.

One man had managed to make that break. Originally a school vice-principal in Indochina he had escaped by boat with his wife and children. Once in Southland he found employment in a jewelry factory. Having a good command of English, he frequently petitioned a language program in the city for work. Eventually his petitioning was successful. By the summer, 1979, he had been in Southland several years and was working full-time as an ESL teacher. He was highly respected by both his colleagues and the Indochinese community. One of the essential features which helped him switch from factory worker to teacher was his familiarity with English.

Many of the young Hmong spoke English, and this clearly played an important part in determining their future goals. One 18 year old male wanted to be a doctor; another 20 year old with whom I spoke just before he left for college was considering becoming an engineer. Both were fluent in English. Since English was a major step toward economic self-sufficiency of adults, MJP served a unique but vital function in attending to both vocational and language needs of the Indochinese community.

At the time of this research MJP was located in an economically depressed section of Southland about half a mile from where most of the Hmong lived. This distance was a source of conflict between the students and MJP. During the day the Hmong generally walked to class, although some drove cars and one man frequently rode with his son on a motorcycle. The streets, threatening during the day, became dangerous for anyone walking at night. Several murders recently had been committed in the area. It was claimed by at least one Anglo familiar with the Hmong community that Hmong women frequently were raped, but I was unable to verify this report. The students pressured MJP to provide some form of transportation to and from class, particularly at night and during the winter months. MJP was not funded to maintain an extensive bus service, however. Hence there was a continuing dissatisfaction on the part of the

students, as indicated by their comments during the formal interviews, that buses could not be provided on a regular basis. Childcare was another request, as was home tutoring, but because of a lack of funds these could not be given serious consideration by the MJP staff.

The building out of which MJP operated was situated on a corner lot, opposite the community swimming pool. During the hot, humid summer months this pool was a locus of evening activity for the predominantly Black neighborhood. The building was a two-story yellow brick with large, blue letters 'MJP' posted diagonally across its face. It was surrounded by overgrown, vacant lots and dilapidated three-story houses, many of which had been gutted by fire. Although the structure itself was in fair condition, the corner of its parking lot fence had been uprooted and leaned precariously over the sidewalk.

MJP was concerned primarily with the employment of qualified minorities in productive and well-paying jobs. Before enrolling in CETA-funded training classes which would prepare them for such employment the students were required to pass a examination prepared by the United States Training and Employment Service. It included twelve tests measuring nine separate aptitudes. The SEAG administrator did not know whether this test, which had been standardized for

native English speakers, had been normed for nonnatives. She felt, however, that it had some linguistic and cultural biases. ESL or 'English as a Second Language' courses funded by HEW were instituted for nonnative speakers of English at MJP in order for the students to obtain the language skills necessary to understand the test, which was given in English. The long-range goal of these classes was to provide the person with sufficient proficiency in English to enable his or her acceptance in the vocational training classes which were offered.

The Southeastern Asian Group (SEAG), a subset of the CETA-funded MJP organization, was supported by HEW. It exclusively dealt with Indochinese immigrants in Southland, including Vietnamese, Cambodians, Hmong and ethnic Laotians. The staff was small, consisting of one teacher/administrator, one full-time teacher, one teacher/job-developer, three evening teachers, a part-time native Hmong teacher, and a secretary. All were under the authority of an administrator of the CETA program although his concerns were not primarily with the SEAG. For the most part this group acted as a self-contained unit. With the exception of the native Hmong speaker, none of the staff spoke Hmong and only one teacher, who himself was Indochinese, were proficient in any other Indochinese languages.

The specific ESL class which I observed consisted of between 15 and 25 beginning to beginning-intermediate adults, although this figure grew to approximately 40 in the early fall. All instruction was carried out in English, with the exception of occasional translation by a Hmong student. The room in which the class operated was approximately twenty feet by thirty feet, and was painted in shades of light green and beige (see Figure 2). Large green chalkboards opposed one another on two of the walls, and a hole over the doorway indicated the previous location of a clock; a chalk drawing of a clock had been sketched beneath it. There were 30 to 35 student desks scattered about the room, forming six to eight separate rows. Several desks in disrepair had been pushed to the rear of the classroom. A counter littered with school pamphlets, papers and books ran along one wall whose windows overlooked the parking lot, and several bulletin boards on the closet doors displayed job-related posters and articles. The single air conditioner had been installed in the middle of five windows; during the hottest days of the summer it was turned on full force. It pushed the temperature of the classroom down to the high 80's, but in inverse proportion kept the background noise level up.

The students typicaly dressed in ethnic Lao fashion. The women wore either polyester pants or a bright, ankle-

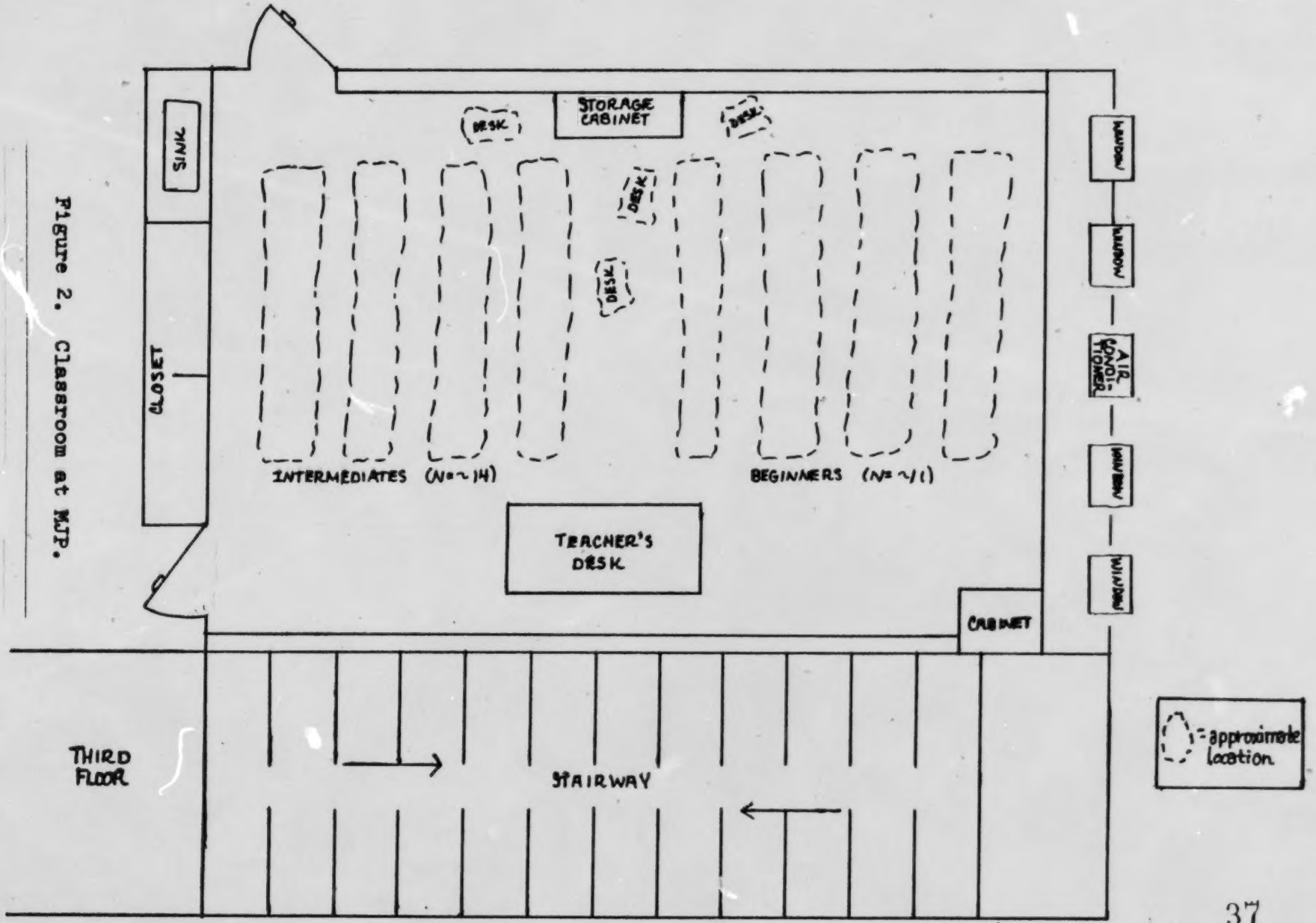

Figure 2. Classroom at MJP.

length wrap-around print skirt, bright print blouse and sandals. Their hair, which almost without exception was long, was pulled down and back, twisted into a figure eight on their heads and held in place with a barrette. Few displayed much jewelry or make-up. One or two wore an elaborately tied blue print turban. The men dressed in dark slacks and a light short-sleeved shirt. Some wore jackets, and most had on heavy dark shoes. For the most part their hair was short, and none wore a beard or moustache.

VI. Learning Techniques of the Hmong

Of the interviewed students (see Appendices A and B), 60% had received no formal schooling in Laos, and a large majority had had three or less years of education (see Figure 3). But 80% were familiar with two to three languages, Lao being the most commonly known followed by Thai. All the men were bi- or multi-lingual, while half the women were (see Figure 4). None of the interviewed pupils could write Hmong, and only one claimed to be able to read it. Yet half felt they had an excellent to fair proficiency in reading Lao and about the same number felt they could write it.

Thus although the Hmong in the ESL class could not read or write their native language they generally were more proficient in other languages than was anticipated. This facility extended not only to verbal skills, but also to those associated with reading and writing as well. The skills, for the most part, were acquired in a nonformal setting, however. To conclude that the students' difficulties in learning English were due to their nonliteracy is inaccurate, since their culture had become literate. To assume that as a group they are illiterate also is erroneous. Slightly more than half actually were able to read and write a language other than their native

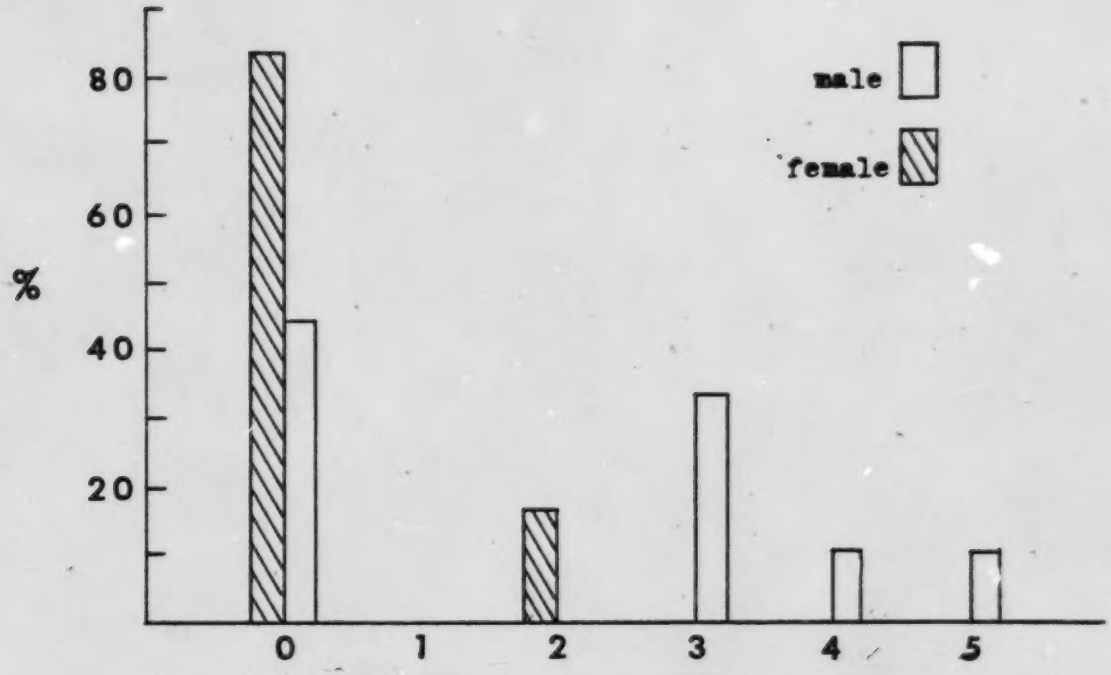

Figure 3. Years Formal Education in Laos.

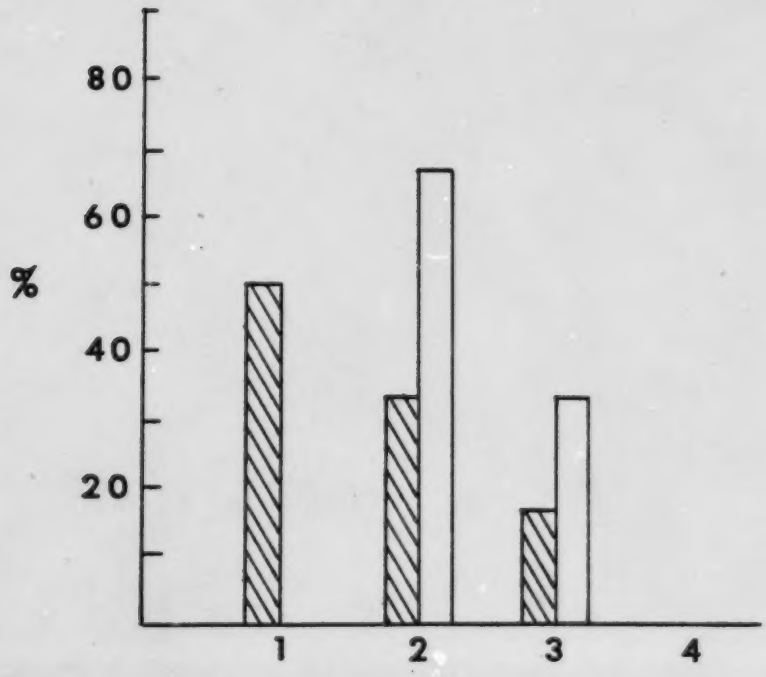

Figure 4. Languages Spoken, Written and/or Read.

one, and more were proficient verbally.

As mentioned above, however, these facts were not discernible in the classroom performance of the students. In addition, individual variability in literacy, language experience, socioeconomic conditions, trauma induced from the war and subsequent transitions, or the general difficulties involved in learning an Indo-European language did not appear to be significant in determining ESL achievement. I assumed that had these variables been influential in inhibiting or facilitating language learning a greater differential between individual performances would have been evident than actually was. Hence I drew the conclusion that none of the factors listed above accounted for what the teachers and administrators believed to be the abnormally slow progression of the class.

I hypothesized that specific learning styles were not being addressed by the Anglo teachers at HJP. These styles included a dependence on mimesis, identification with the teacher, peer influence and group support and cooperation. Mimesis was seen as an important mode of learning from observations and the responses of students in the interviews. I noticed, for instance, the concentration with which one elderly man frequently mimicked not only the teacher's vocal patterns, but his movements as well. This

observation seems to support Fortes' discussion of the reliance by nonliterate societies on mimesis in learning (Fortes, 1970).

Further, the students requested that the teacher write everything down on the blackboard, even that information which was included in books or xeroxed handouts. They claimed this would enable them to copy the teacher's handwriting movements. In addition to its mimetic function I believe it also reinforced their identification with him. Identification of this sort is mentioned by Fortes in his work on the Tallensi (ibid.:242). Coming from a clan-structured society which until very recently was nonliterate traditional information would have been transmitted nonformally, and specifically through oral means. Hence the learner would have experienced personal interaction with the teacher.

I felt that an important reason for the success of the home-tutoring was the degree to which identification with the teacher was facilitated by interaction within the students' own environment. Personal bonds with the teacher, suggested by some of the students in the interviews, were established within the students' home. For instance, during one home-tutoring session the young male head of the household, Vang, quietly rose and left the apartment. Five

to ten minutes later he returned carrying an undiscernible package and then disappeared into the kitchen. He reappeared shortly in the livingroom where the class was being held, carefully carrying a large, flowered dinner plate on which three opened cans of 7-Up rested. He placed the tray on a low table covered with an ornately appliqued square of cloth and carried it to where I sat with the ESL teacher and her assistant. Vang then returned to his original seat, accepting our thanks, and rising again only to take his very young daughter out of the room when she went crying to him. The three of us felt obligated to drink all the 7-Up before we left the house. The instructor claimed Vang's action was carried out in similar fashion during each teaching session. I felt that in addition to simply being a gracious gesture, a major function of the activity was to establish a personal bond between the members of the household and the teachers, which was facilitated by the acceptance and consumption of the soda.

Following the notion of identification I felt the students would learn well when learning from peers. This arose from statements made by the pupils in the interviews when they requested more time to speak with one another in English. This request was taken further, and discussion in Hmong was encouraged in the classroom for both the purposes of clarification and translation. Translators were obtained

from more advanced classes, and seemed to have a beneficial influence on the class. Frequently the teacher would recite a written dialogue several times. He would ask whether the students understood it. At the beginning of the summer they gave little response, sometimes merely shaking their heads slightly or looking befuddled. Later in the summer a Hmong student from a more advanced class was used to interpret the dialogue. The student, or students, would translate line by line. Generally the class responded enthusiastically to this translation. The pupils would ask questions of the translator in Hmong, discuss various points among themselves, and smile and laugh. As opposed to the slight shaking of the head or covert look of confusion observed earlier, the students displayed open interest and relaxation. While this change along does not indicate any amelioration of the learning difficulties encountered by the Hmong, I suggest that generally a classroom in which enthusiasm and relaxation are displayed would seem to be more conducive to learning than one in which tension and frustration are clearly evident.

Finally, it became evident that the atmosphere within the class benefitted from an emphasis on group, rather than individual performance. On several occasions I experimented with the use of class support to individual performance, switching the emphasis from person to group. For example,

when the class was encouraged to respond to questions addressed to persons working at the blackboard a feeling of concentration and enjoyment seemed to pervade the activity. In addition, the correct answer to the question was given by at least one person in the class, unlike the erroneous or incomplete responses given to a majority of questions. Hence the students experienced both social and academic success. This emphasis was suggested by Dumont (1972) who determined that the most successful learning environment for the clan-structured Cherokee was one in which the students were managed like a team, rather than as separate individuals. This management corresponded to traditional Cherokee interactional patterns.

It might be possible to interpret the observed improvement as reflecting a 'threshold effect', i.e., that students had reached the critical point in their studies beyond which learning would progress exponentially. However, the difficulties observed in the beginning to beginning-intermediate classroom were evident in other, more advanced classes, both in Southland and other areas of the U.S. The slowness was encountered in different settings and with different Hmong groups at HJP who had had more exposure to English language instruction. Thus, a threshold effect is not likely. For the same reasons it is unlikely the pupils had effectively learned how to manage their

environment.

To summarize: preexistent levels of literacy and second language familiarity were discounted as influencing the speed of the students' acquisition of English. Subsequently I hypothesized that the Hmong had certain learning needs which were not recognized and hence were not being met in an adequate fashion. Mimesis, identification with the teacher, peer communication and team cooperation, for instance, were seen as important Hmong learning styles which were ignored at HJP.

VII. Theory

This section provides a model for the discussion of why specific learning needs of the students were not met. The problems experienced in the classroom were a result of the Hmong and Anglos not sharing basic cultural values, and the absence of an environment which could effectively negotiate a sharing. In the following section I will show why successful communication between the two groups was precluded. I also will discuss Dumont and Wax's study of the Cherokee, a group that experienced difficulties in the Anglo classroom similar to those of the Hmong. Ultimately I will recommend the establishment of an environment in which the preclusion mentioned above can be overcome. My examination primarily will be based on the symbolic interactionist and ethnomethodological theories of Mead, Linton, Goffman, Garfinkel and others.

I suggest role performance may be investigated within a framework having three levels: locational, conformative and processual (see Figure 5). The primary or locational level is that physical environment to which specific statuses and roles of a given social institution correspond. The secondary, conformative level is a conceptual construct. It involves a set of formal statuses and roles within which an individual is identified and to which his actions are

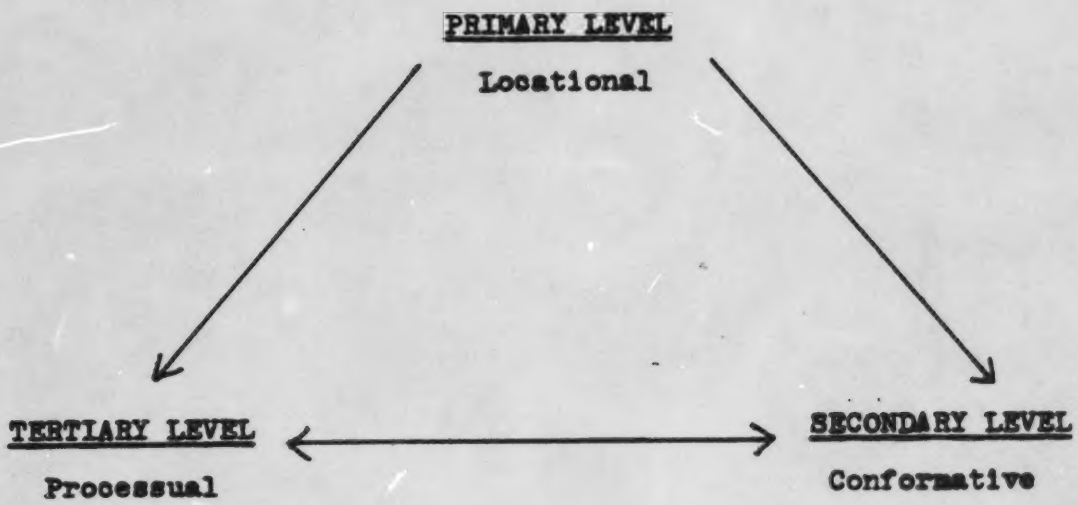

Figure 5. Role Performance Framework.

expected to conform. The tertiary level allows for a process in which these roles are manipulated by the actor in achieving certain goals. Thus the spatially-defined primary region designates secondary, conformative statuses and their concommittant roles. These are given situational relevance by tertiary, processual modes of behavior which also are directly limited by the primary level.

In this study the ESL classroom is the maximal geographical unit of investigaton. Within it formal teaching and learning are expected to occur on a regular basis. At the primary level the statuses of teacher and student are correlated to it. Conversely, it integrates into a consistent and coherent whole the dichotomous roles.

On a secondary level these roles are the ideal against which the actors' behavior are expected to conform. Following Spiro (1961:98), "The role, then, is the smallest unit in the social system; the operation of the social system, ultimately and most directly, depends on the proper performance of roles." Prior to most initial interpersonal interactions the participants have generalized expectations of the relative appropriateness of certain roles, or general categories of behavior. These understandings evolve from their abstract social constructions of the way 'things are.' In the case of HJP these included the statuses of 'teacher'

and 'student,' and the modes of activity which were to be expected from each status. Such social constructions are culturally determined and ultimately derive from a group's abstract notions of time, space and personal identity.

Traditional approaches to education often are constrained at the secondary level of role-performance, as the class at MJP seemed to be. In one type of Anglo class the superordinance of the teacher and the subordinance of the pupil is stressed. The teaching itself is what Dumont and Wax (1969) call 'unidirectional' and involves a predominant flow of information from teacher to student. This implies a concept of education as "a process imposed upon a target population in order to shape and stamp them into becoming dutiful citizens, responsible employees, or good Christians" (ibid.:217).

Learning also takes place when the students manage the teacher in such a way as to have her or him conform to their expectations and instruct them in what they desire to know, utilizing methods which are most familiar. This seemed to occur in home-tutoring. The interactive approach involves mutual give and take between instructor and pupil. Action of the sort is included in the tertiary or processual level of the analysis of role performance, since it allows for role manipulation by the actor in achieving certain goals.

The roles of teacher and student may be momentarily reversed, for instance, when the instructor allows her or himself to be taught the preferred styles of the pupils.

Consciously interactive teaching is especially demanded when the teacher and students are radically ethnically dissimilar. The actors in a situation such as the one at HJP, where the students and teacher have little or no common ethnic ground, bring to the classroom differing and sometimes conflicting expectations. This is particularly true of students who have had only a few years formal education, since notions of the roles of student and teacher are not only specified by ethnic factors, but by experiential ones as well. For example, a Cambodian man who, it was believed, had had a significant amount of formal schooling, experienced none of the difficulties in the classroom the Hmong pupils did. He readily understood directions in English, although his command of the language was not significantly better than those of the others. He seemed generally more acquainted with the mechanics of class instructions and procedures. Within a few days after his arrival at HJP he was moved from the beginning class to one more advanced.

Without an approach which consciously stresses a mutual socialization of both teacher and student, conflicts based

on ethnic and experiential differences are not communicated and may remain unresolved. When students and teacher share some cultural values, the need for cross-cultural communication is not as critical. Consequently it may be the case that an approach which heavily stresses interactive methods is unnecessary.

Turner takes as a starting point in role theory the tendency of the self to create and modify dichotomous formulations of its own role and the roles of others (1962:21). Instead of conforming to a given role, as is expected at Level Two, the self engages in an ongoing process of role-boundary delimitation. Turner contends that "Free from formal regulation, the self- and other-role perspective in any situation may occasionally shift" (ibid.:22).

Kultgen (1975) makes the phenomenological claim that the transcendent ego is not only the means-apprehending agency, but also the agency that provides meaning. Hence the self both apprehends the appropriate status and concommitant role of Level Two, and determines parameters to suit its own needs on Level Three.

Mehan (1979) uses an ethnomethodological approach (Heyman, 1979) in his analysis of everyday interpersonal

action in a classroom of school-age children. He employs the term 'interactive socializaton' to refer to the "'reflexive' fact that participants to interaction, including socializing interacton, mutually influence each other" (ibid.:29). Mehan believes

> a teacher teaches a child while the child teaches the teacher. Or in more general terms, children structure and modify their environment (including adults) just as they are structured and modified by it. (ibid.)

Assumed in this statement is Turner's contention (1962:23) that the process of role-boundary delimitation by the self shifts the emphasis from enacting a proscribed role, to devising a performance which is based on the imputed role of the other. Unidirectonal approaches to education overlook the reciprocal, and as Mehan has asserted (1979:28), simultaneous causation of the interactive process.

Dumont and Wax (1969) observe a classroom of Cherokee students in which interactive socialization is precluded, as for the Hmong, by unrecognized differences between teachers and students. These differences are reflected in ethnic disparities in teaching and learning styles. Like the Hmong the Cherokee have experienced significant learning problems in a formal Anglo educational setting. Neither the origin

nor the solution to the learning difficulties of either of the two groups has been easily diagnosed or implemented.

The rural Cherokee of northeastern Oklahoma are distinguished by high unemployment rates, low incomes and an unusually large proportion of persons receiving financial relief (ibid.:219). In a variety of ways the Cherokee closely resemble the Hmong in Southland, particularly since the purpose of formal education for both has been to "learn English and to acquire a means of achieving economic stability" (Dumont, 1972:368). The traditional way of life for the two groups has included intensive agriculture. Both lost their lands and are being forced to adapt themselves to historicaly new subsistence activities. In a transformation similar to that of the Hmong the Cherokee

> have been goaded along a continuum that led from being autonomous societies to being a 'domestic dependent nation' and thence to being an ethnically subordinated people in a caste-like status. (ibid.:218)

Both Cherokee and Hmong students are considered 'model pupils' in a behavioral, but not necessarily academic sense. They have learned at home that "restraint and caution is the proper mode of relating to others; therefore in the classroom the teacher finds it unnecessary to enforce discipline" (ibid.).

I also found the Hmong 'model' pupils. For instance, I was asked to take a group of five students to work in the language lab, with which they were minimally, if at all, familiar. After everyone was seated with headphones in place waiting for the dialogue to begin I realized I had forgotten the books which were to be read along with the tape. Racing out of the room I left all five sitting erect in their chairs, hands folded in their laps, headphones on, and eyes directed forward and down. Much to my embarassment I was unable to find the books as quickly as I had hoped and it was a full five minutes before I was able to return. When I reentered the room, anticipating I had lost the students' attention in my absence, I was shocked to discovered that apparently no one had moved during the entire period I'd been gone. They were seated exactly a I had left them. It was passive behavior of this sort in the classroom, in addition to their assertiveness outside it, that earned them their reputation as good students.

Dumont and Wax examine the nature of the teacher/student interactive process in the Cherokee classroom. They conclude that a clash between the cultures of the students and teachers was giving rise to teacher frustration and student learning difficulties. The answer, they claim, is to reshuffle the traditional classroom roles in order to facilitate an intercultural exchange between

actors (ibid.:223). The environment within which such an exchange can take place is termed the 'Intercultural Classroom' (ibid.).

Dumont and Wax seem to be implementing Mehan's observations of everday classroom behavior. Whereas interactive socialization, for the latter, occurs necessarily within the structure of the situation, Dumont and Wax see this process as blocked in one which is bi- or multiethnic. It would seem that without a sharing of basic cultural values interactive socialization, taken for granted in Mehan's environment, is precluded, resulting in misunderstanding, frustration and lack of learning.

For Dumont and Wax the successful classroom is Intercultural, "a locus where persons of different cultural traditions can engage in mutually beneficial transactions without affront to either" (ibid.:224). Unless "the teacher chooses to recognize the social nature of the classroom and to work toward integrating his teaching with that life, he will not be able to elicit active learning experiences from his pupils" (ibid.).

Following Turner, Kultgen, Mehan and the role performance framework discussed above the actor in the Intercultural Classroom is able to infer the role of the

other and adapt her or his own performance to it. This action is dropped from Level Two, conforming to a formal status, to Level Three, manipulating roles to achieve desired ends. Thus teacher and students are able to actively socialize one another, subsequently expressing and fulfilling needs and expectations. The successful learning environment is one in which this process freely occurs.

VIII. Conclusion

The primary goal of this study was to examine the relation of learning environment to language acquisition by adult Hmong immigrants by isolating the more salient features of that environment and evaluating their success in meeting the learners' needs. I observed an atmosphere of tension and disorientation in the classroom which, following Dumont and Wax (1969) I felt to be symptomatic of a cultural clash. The cultural clash evolved, on the surface, from a lack of awareness Anglo teachers and administrators had regarding the students' preferred learning techniques. These included mimesis, identification with the teacher, peer communication and group cooperation and support. More fundamentally, it reflected the fact that the Hmong and the Anglos in Southland did not share fundamental cultural values. The structure of the learning environment was such that values could not be communicated through an interactive socialization of teachers and students.

Because the Hmong have only recently come to Southland their special educational needs have yet to be fully assessed. It is hoped that additional studies will provide more extensive information regarding different cultural learning styles, ultimately enabling teachers and

administrators of the various educational agencies to provide the Hmong and other groups with programs better tailored to their needs.

APPENDIX

date:_____
interviewer:_____
translator:_____

Name:_____ Date of Birth:_____
Address:_____ Age:_____
_____ Sex:_____
_____ Number of Persons
Telephone Number:_____ in Household:_____
Marital Status:_____ Ages & Relations
When:_____ of Above:_____
Native Country:_____ _____
Citizenship:_____ _____
How Long in U.S.:_____ Number of Dependents:_____
How Long in Rhode Island:_____

Employment History in U.S.
Present: Name of Persons/Firm:_____
Address:_____
_____
Job Title:_____
Duties:_____

Previous: Name of Persons/Firm:_____
Address:_____
_____
Job Title:_____
Duties:_____

Religious Affiliation:_____ How Long:_____

Date of Departing Native Country:_____
Reason:_____
Transition to Refugee Camp:_____
yes no
If Yes,
Where:_____
For How Long:_____
Date of Departure:_____

Were You Given Any Special Training in the Camp:_____
yes no
If yes, What Kind:_____
_____

Employment in Native Country
Job Title:_____
Duties:_____

Job Training in Native Country Where:_____
Apprenticeship:_____ How Long:_____
Formal Program:_____ How Long:_____
Self Taught:_____

Level of Education Attained Prior to Arrival in U.S.
Highest Grade Completed:_____ Diploma:_____
Where:_____
Number of Years Spent in Classroom:_____

Language Proficiency (Including Native Language)

Language	Speaking				Reading				Writing			
	ex	good	fair	poor	ex	good	fair	poor	ex	good	fair	poor
1.												
2.												
3.												
4.												

Please Write a Few Sentences in the Languages Known to You:

1. (Language:_____) _____
_____

2. (Language:_____) _____
_____

3. (Language:_____) _____
_____

4. (Language:_____) _____
_____

Special Training or Skills Not Covered in Above (Including Military):_____
_____

Location of Residence in Native Country:_____

What are Your Immediate Plans:_____
_____

What are Your Long-Range Goals:_____
_____

How Do You Expect M.J.P. to help You Achieve These Plans and Goals:_____
_____
_____

What Do You Especially Like About M.J.P.:_____
_____
_____

What Are Your Primary Criticisms of M.J.P.:_____
_____
_____

What Services Would You Like to See Instituted at M.J.P.: _____

Additional Questions, Reactions: _____

What is Your Evaluation of this Questionnaire: _____

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Appendix B. Summary of Questionnaire Results

Age of Interviewee	Absolute Frequency
18	1
24	1
27	2
31	1
33	2
35	3
37	1
42	1
45	1
62	1
77	1
total	15

Sex	
male	9
female	6

Marital Status	
married	15

Length of Time in U.S. (months)	
3	1
4	4
5	1
7	1
10	1
11	2
12	1
36	4

Length of Time in State (months)

2	1
3	1
4	4
5	1
7	1
10	1
11	1
12	2
36	3

Number of Children in Household

0	2
1	2
2	2
4	2
5	1
6	3
7	2
8	1

Number of Generations in Household

1	1
2	10
3	4

Religion

Buddhist	5
Baptist	7
Catholic	3

Year Departed Laos

1975	10
1976	3
1977	0
1978	2
1979	0

Extent of Schooling in Laos (years)

0	9
2	1
3	3
4	1
5	1

Number of Languages Spoken, Written and/or Read

1	3
2	8
3	4

Lao Spoken, Written and/or Read

yes	12
no	3

Thai Spoken, Written and/or Read

yes	3
no	11
missing	1

English Spoken, Written and/or Read

yes	1
no	13
missing	1

Appendix C. Indochinese Population of the US by State

Indochinese Refugee Reports
July 24, 1979

1.	California	58,037
2.	Texas	18,639
3.	Pennsylvania	9,305
4.	Louisiana	8,033
5.	Washington	7,531
6.	Virginia	7,335
7.	Illinois	7,315
8.	Florida	6,381
9.	New York	6,199
10.	Minnesota	5,445
11.	Oregon	5,318
12.	Colorado	4,335
13.	Oklahoma	4,254
14.	Michigan	3,756
15.	Ohio	3,634
16.	Hawaii	3,622
17.	Iowa	3,379
18.	Wisconsin	3,216
19.	Missouri	3,324
20.	Maryland	3,087
21.	Kansas	2,550
22.	Indiana	2,295
23.	Tennessee	2,055
24.	Arkansas	2,054
25.	Georgia	2,045
26.	New Jersey	2,027
27.	Connecticut	2,026
28.	Massachusetts	1,908
29.	Utah	1,863
30.	Nebraska	1,801
31.	District of Columbia	1,782
32.	Alabama	1,655
33.	North Carolina	1,610
34.	Arizona	1,547
35.	Kentucky	1,313
36.	Rhode Island	1,094
37.	New Mexico	1,072
38.	Nevada	1,024
39.	South Carolina	956
40.	Mississippi	852
41.	Montana	562
42.	South Dakota	530
43.	Unknown State	499

44. Guam	489
45. Idaho	488
46. North Dakota	404
47. Maine	354
48. Alaska	263
49. Delaware	201
50. West Virginia	193
51. New Hampshire	166
52. Wyoming	112
53. Vermont	52
54. Puerto Rico	36
55. Virgin Island	17
Total	210,437

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